Z CULTURAL
REVISTA DO PROGRAMA AVANÇADO
DE CULTURA CONTEMPORÂNEA
ISSN 1980 9921

FAKE NEWS, FAKE HISTORY? A RACIST JUDGE TAKES ON ZUMBI

Marc A. Hertzman

Resumo: Este ensaio considera o potencial de encontrar ideais e caminhos produtivos através de uma refutação de e engajamento com o comentário da desembargadora Marília de Castro Neves Vieira, quem ressaltou que Zumbi é "mito histórico", inventado para "estimular racismo". Se o fato de existência de Zumbi não precisa provas, a construção de mitos sobre ele é, de fato, assunto interessante, só não da maneira que Neves sugere. O artigo descreve e analisa quatro mitos construídos sobre Zumbi não com o objetivo de valorizar Neves, mas, ao contrário, para entender de onde vem sua declaração absurda e para ressaltar outras linhas de pensamento sobre a mitologia sobre Zumbi, Palmares e a resistência contra a escravidão em geral.

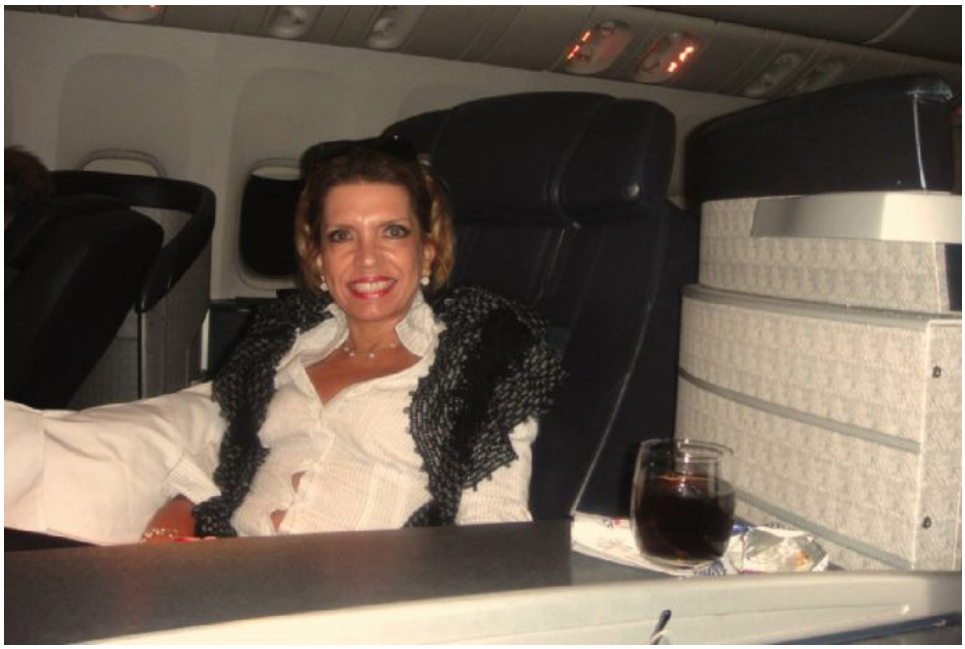
Palavras-chaves: Zumbi; Dandara; quilombos; escravidão; resistência.

Abstract: This essay explores the potential of finding productive ideas and routes through a refutation and engagement with the commentary made by Judge Marília de Castro Neves Vieira that Zumbi is a "historical myth," invented to "stimulate racism." If the fact of Zumbi's existence does not need further substantiation, the construction of myths about him is, in fact, an interesting subject, just not in the way that Neves suggests. The article describes and analyzes four myths constructed about and around Zumbi. This is done not with the objective of valorizing Neves—just the opposite, the idea is to understand where her absurd declaration comes from and to emphasize other lines of thinking about the mythology surrounding Zumbi, Palmares, and resistance against slavery, in general.

Keywords: Zumbi; Dandara; quilombos; slavery, resistance.

As right-wing politicians continue to ascend globally, it is of little surprise that they display little if any command (or interest) in the histories of race and slavery, or the relationship between past and present. Not so long ago (though it feels like ages), George W. Bush visited Brazil and asked then president Fernando Henrique Cardoso "Do you have blacks, too?" Bush's National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice quickly jumped in. "Mr. President," she said, "Brazil probably has more blacks than the USA."[1] More recently, Donald Trump displayed a similar ignorance, calling Frederick Douglass "an example of somebody who's done an amazing job and is getting recognized more and more, I notice," as if Douglass, the famed slave-turned-abolitionist and brilliant orator and writer who died in 1895, was an up and coming entrepreneur or artist (Wootson, Jr.).

Enter Judge Marília de Castro Neves Vieira, she of countless venomous lies and slurs spewed at the likes of Marielle Franco and Jean Wyllys. Last March, Neves called Zumbi, the last leader of Palmares and namesake for the National Day of Black Conscience, an "invented myth." Before digging more deeply into the surprisingly rich possibilities hidden in Neves's patently false statement, a few points of fact are in order, inspired at least in part by Neves's own Facebook page, which reveals her favorite quote to be, "Know the truth, and it will set you free."[2]



Neves's Facebook profile. *Available at: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/03/20/politica/1521561716_720743.html*

First, though it seems like a painful waste of time and space to make this point, Zumbi was real. Brazilians have been writing about him for centuries, and in recent years Flávio Gomes and Silvia Lara (among others) have collected, transcribed, and brilliantly analyzed scores of documents about his life and death, and the larger history of Palmares (e.g., Gomes, 2010; Lara, 2008).[3] Second, Neves' absurd statement and larger collection of caustic provocations are a mix of Trump and Bush, whose own ignorance and chauvinism are not to be dismissed, even now when they almost seem to pale in comparison to Trump's. Bush had no qualms using "dog whistles," a euphemism for racist statements presented in a way that might sound innocuous but whose real message is clear to a racist base of voters, eager to preserve white privilege. Bush's father, George H.W., perfected the art of the whistle with his infamous 1988 "Willie Horton ad," a television spot that played on white paranoia of black crime and helped Bush Sr. win the presidency. Trump, meanwhile, most often discards the whistle altogether and simply makes hideously racist statements. Indeed, his campaign and presidency are built on such statements.

Indirectly, at least, Neves is a Trump acolyte by way of Bolsonaro, all peers in the lowest sense of the word. In her attacks on Marielle and Wyllys, Neves has shown little use for hiding anything between the lines, determining that doing so is too much work and no longer necessary, anyway. To once again state an obvious but necessary point: casting the inspiration of Brazil's Day of Black Conscience as an invented myth is to spit in the face of history and countless activists and citizens who every day bear the weight of racism in its many forms. And yet part of what makes her comments about Zumbi so potentially pernicious is that they link up with long-standing—and truly mythological—ideas about Brazilian "racial democracy," a concept that has been used (though not always with that name) for many decades to suppress and silence black activists and other oppositional voices.

As with Trump, Bolsonaro, and other demagogues, Neves's outlandish comments pose a number of dilemmas, including whether or not to even engage them in the first place. There is no perfect formula for when to let racism whither on the branch and when to denounce it publicly, but given the great deal of attention that the comment has already received there is a case to be made here for denunciation over silence. But what to say? A point of guidance comes from anthropologist-activist Yarimar Bonilla, who chose to respond when Trump tweeted utter falsehoods about Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico in 2017. "His insistence," she wrote, "on maligning Puerto Rico and its people might have an unintended positive outcome: to cast a spotlight on Puerto Rico's long-standing problems" (Bonilla, 2018). Dwelling too deeply on Neves's comments runs the risk of dignifying and giving them extra life. But there is perhaps a way to find unintended positive outcomes here, too. What if, for example, we take the idea of an "invented myth" at face value and then turn the assertion into a question: what myths *have* been created around Zumbi? As it happens, there are, in fact, a number of myths surrounding Zumbi, just not the one that Neves suggested. In fact, and somewhat ironically, much of the myth making around Zumbi leads down the very roads and lines of inquiry that Neves intended to close down. Four myths, among others to choose from, stand out.

Myth #1: Zumbi is Palmares

Though Neves hardly meant it in this way, it is in fact true both that there is mythology surrounding Zumbi and that that mythology has marginalized other people and other histories. In 1678, Gangazumba, then the leader of Palmares' sprawling collection of mocambos, signed a peace accord with the Portuguese. During the late twentieth century, as Zumbi became a figure of national renown and as more research about Palmares came out, Gangazumba became, as Lara (2008, p. 10) puts it, "a counterpoint: a leader who had misjudged the forces at play, succumbed to the weight of defeat, and lost all standing among his followers".[4] Gangazumba thus has been depicted as weak and traitorous, while Zumbi became the consummate hero.

If both Gangazumba and Zumbi are often cast in unrealistically dichotomous (romanticized or demonized) form, in other cases the enthroning of Zumbi as *the* representative of Palmares takes other forms. While Neves complains about Palmares and the larger history of mocambos and quilombos being spoken of at all, others might reasonably object to the way that Palmares often stands in for all runaway or fugitive slave experiences. Flávio Gomes and others have shown the nature, expanse, and geography of mocambos and quilombos to have been almost unimaginably vast and complex (e.g., Gomes, 2005; Reis and Gomes, 1996). As these authors suggest, Zumbi may carry crucial symbolic weight, but history is also full of nameless other men and women, the vast majority of them marginalized not only by reactionaries like Neves but also less intentionally by earnest and well-meaning scholars and activists. As the Zumbi-Gangazumba dyad suggests, the historiography of Palmares—and mocambos and quilombos, in general—is dominated by male figures. Perhaps the most famous female quilombola is one whose very existence we know next to nothing about. Dandara, who one writer calls "the feminine face of Palmares," has generated powerful meaning and symbolism, but precious little is known about her (Dandara). In fact, it is not certain whether she was a single person, a conglomeration of different individuals, or a creation passed down over time as a shield against unending waves of erasure and repression. Whatever Dandara's origins, she is hardly responsible for division, as Neves would have it, and has instead become a remarkable means for claiming and accessing histories that have otherwise been obliterated.

Myth #2: Zumbi killed himself (and so Brazil is not racist)

To Neves, Zumbi was invented "in order to stimulate a racism that Brazil previously did not know" ("5 Momentos").[5] There is no point rehashing the countless refutations of the notion that Brazil is or ever was free of racism. Other issues bear further scrutiny and discussion. For example, the notion that the black activists—those who helped turn the anniversary of Zumbi's death into the Day of National Conscience and those who continue to observe it—somehow "stimulated" or "invented" racism parrots one of the main lines of argumentation used to oppose Brazil's landmark affirmative action legislation. By advocating for more equitable representation in higher education and beyond, critics insist, proponents of affirmative action and quotas create "dangerous divisions" that were previously unknown or minimal in Brazil (Fry et al, 2007.).

The argument that *afrodescendentes* or anyone else struggling against racist structures of exclusion, marginalization, and violence may themselves be guilty of sowing divide by calling attention to inequality has been used for ages in Brazil and the US. In the US, the myth has been debunked by, among others, North American political scientist Ira Katznelson, who shows how generations of structural, institutional, and casual racism in effect equaled a powerful and pervasive "affirmative action for whites" (Katznelson). Though this was enforced and enacted via different mechanisms than in the US, Brazil has its own history of "affirmative action for whites," who historically gained much greater access to education, infrastructure, privilege, and opportunity than blacks.

Papering over and denying racial inequality is a central strategy for political figures like Neves and the opponents of legislation to guarantee spaces at universities and in other venues for underrepresented minorities and ensure the inclusion of African and minority history in school curriculum. Discourses about Brazil's putative "racial democracy," which by definition would not need affirmative action or quotas, has relied on countless smaller stories and myths, including a number about Zumbi. One is the centuries-old story that he died by his own hand, throwing himself off a cliff to avoid capture and a certain return to slavery. In fact, colonial documents make clear, Zumbi was captured and killed, his body then mutilated, and his head posted on a stake as a warning again other would-be runaways and rebels. The suicide myth appeared in the earliest writings about Zumbi and persisted for centuries, often as part of a romantically constructed history of slavery. As a self-sacrificing martyr, Zumbi's suicide became a symbol of a closed chapter of Brazilian history and a way to lighten the burden of, and ultimately erase, white violence. By contrast, the actual death and decapitation represent a brutal recounting of the racial terror that white colonizers and their descendants wrought. The suicide story therefore helped keep the blood off of white hands and neatly sealed Zumbi, Palmares, and slavery into a closed compartment to be accessed selectively in the service of fanciful histories of racial inclusion. Neves is actually right that myths *about* Zumbi have been constructed, though she is dead wrong in suggesting that they somehow helped exacerbate racial divisions. Just the opposite, the suicide myth and others have been used for centuries to deny very real divisions and larger histories of racism.

Myth #3: "Zumbi owned slaves" (and was like Hitler)

Desembargadora Neves's "invented myth" post gains legs in part because there are already well developed, though misleading and often just plain false, critiques circulating in Brazil. One of the most popular revolves around the supposition that Zumbi owned slaves. In his popular *Guia politicamente incorreto da história do Brasil* (Politically Incorrect Guide to the History of Brazil), Leandro Narloch cherry picks bits of evidence from scholarly references to cobble together an ostensibly irreverent and frank version of history that, in fact, simply reproduces old talking points, the great majority of which line up neatly with anti-black and anti-leftist lines of argumentation. One of the things that makes Narloch's work so potent is that it engages, even if selectively, with serious scholarship and in some cases even makes important points. For example, he points out the forgotten importance of Gangazumba, though does so in a way that is both contradictory and indicative of his goals. On the one hand, he demonizes Zumbi for rejecting the peace accord, and on the other hand suggests that Gangazumba descended from a savage lineage, thus casting him alternately as a symbol of peace and a war-prone brute (Narloch, 2012, p. 75, 78).

Narloch frames his discussion of Palmares with a section heading that doubles as a sensationalist headline: "Zumbi owned slaves" (Narloch, 2012, p. 73).[6] This point, he claims (without any specific references) "appears to offend some people today, to the point that they prefer to omit or censure it" (Narloch, 2012, p. 73).[7] In fact, the complex issue of slaves and former slaves who owned slaves is treated with great depth and subtlety by some of the very same scholars whose work Narloch selectively cites. But in Narloch's hands, multifaceted histories are reduced to what amounts to a campaign or advertising slogan — *Zumbi owned slaves!* — that also functions as a vehicle by which to sneak in other disproven myths. To "prove" his point, Narloch reprises an old saw about the notions of liberty and freedom emanating from Europe. He writes,

> The slave system only began to collapse when the Enlightenment gained strength in Europe and the United States… Abolitionists appeared a century after Zumbi and seven thousand kilometers from the region where the Quilombo of Palmares was constructed. It is difficult to believe, in the middle of the jungles of Alagoas, Zumbi had anticipated the European humanist spirit or foresaw the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity of the French Revolution (Narloch, 2012, p. 74).[8]

In one fell swoop, the author revives a veritable pantheon of hoary, long-disproven ideas—that history and progress began in Europe and the U.S., eventually moving south and west; that everyone back then owned slaves so what's the big deal, anyway?; that history may be understood through the western, liberal categories codified by the French Revolution; that Zumbi and other blacks were too backwards or pre-modern to understand or even desire freedom.

It is difficult to know where to even begin to address the misconceptions and falsehoods repeated here. Suffice to say that each and every one has been thoroughly disproven by historians not just in Brazil but also throughout the Americas and beyond. Before concluding the section on Zumbi, *The Politically Incorrect Guide* also takes a swipe at João Goulart *and* Leonel Brizola, placing blame for the apparently "politically correct" histories of Zumbi on Marxists and the left, writ large (Narloch, 2012, p. 77). This is also indicative of Narloch's political vision, and of the way that historical falsehoods feed political agendas—fake history begets fake news. In this case, faulty historical relativism (everyone back then was bad, and slavery was just the way things worked, *even for Zumbi*) is employed to undo the work of black activists and to remove Zumbi as the figurehead of freedom and even black conscience, to reestablish instead the primacy of Princesa Isabel, Rio Branco and other white patrons, and to generally absorb the fall of slavery into a heroic, romantic arc of history that eventually produced Brazil's putative racial paradise.

The myths stemming from the notion that Zumbi owned slaves links up in a somewhat stunning way with the "dangerous divisions" line of argument through the remarkable rhetoric of the hardline Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL, Free Brazil Movement) and one of its

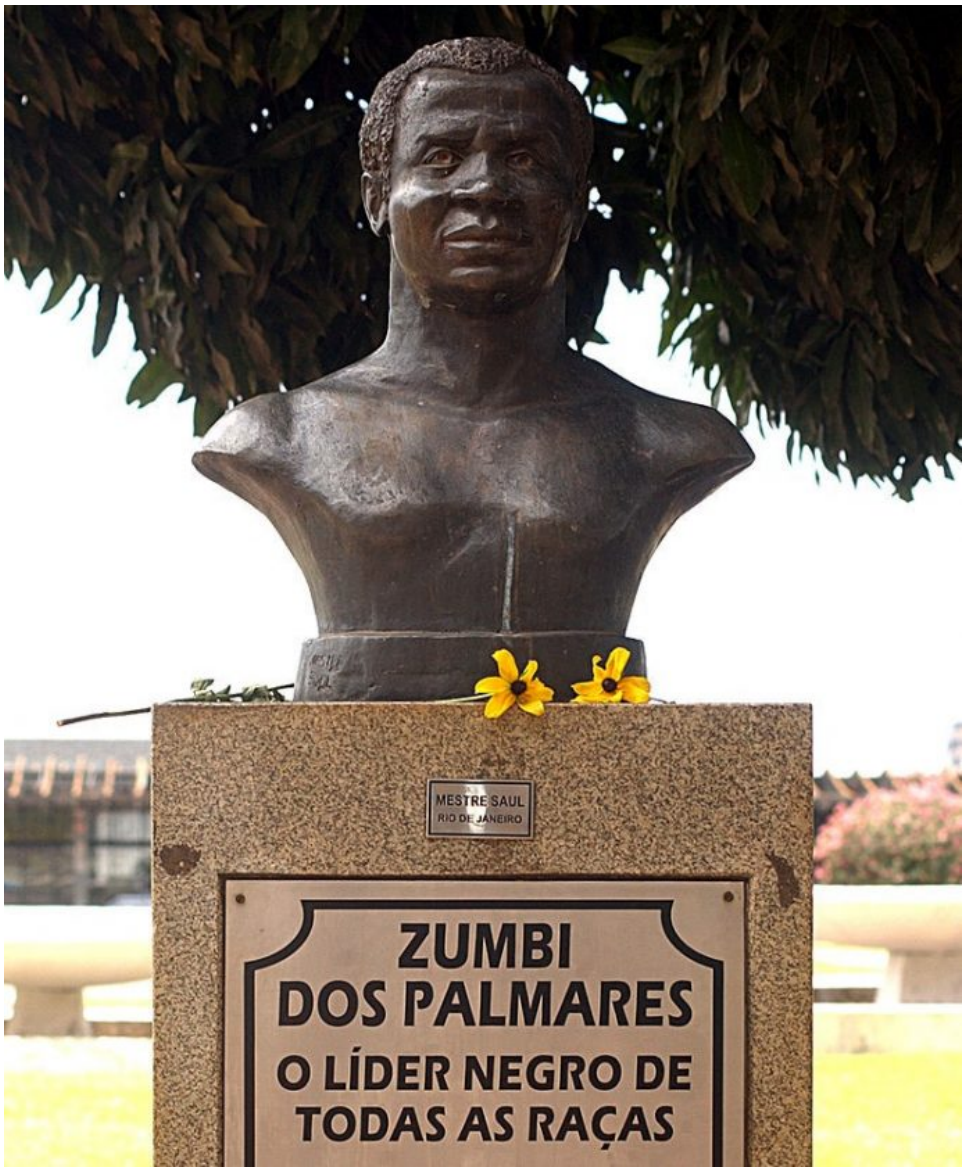
figureheads, Fernando Silva, better known as Fernando Holiday. Holiday, a young man who describes himself as "black, poor and honest," likens the Day of Black Conscience to "a day of white conscience honoring Hitler." Not only did Zumbi have slaves, Holiday maintains, but tortured them (Alessi). Zumbi, Holiday and the MBL suggest, was not only evil on a level comparable to Hitler, but also now the root of new divisions that threatened to destroy what was once a country free of racial strife.

Myth #4: Zumbi was the "Leader of All Races"

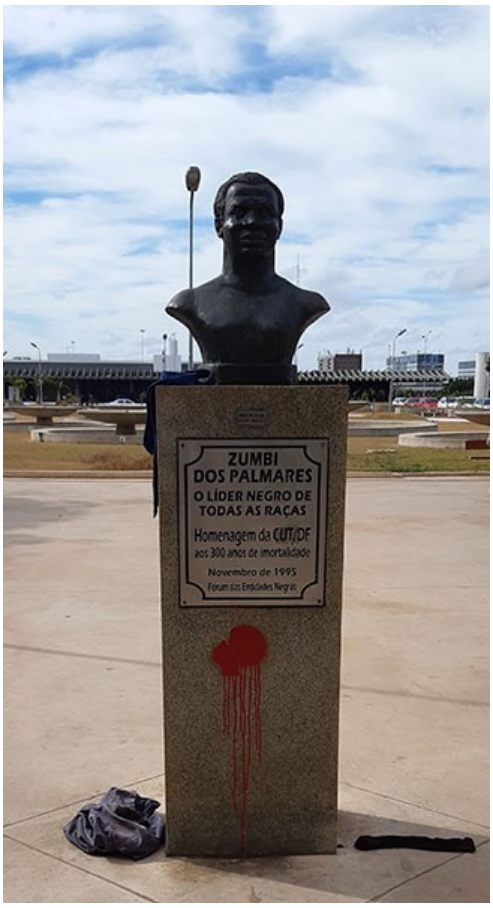
The idea that Zumbi and the Day of Black Conscience create rather than critique societal division evolved especially over the last five decades, in response to the consolidation of the 20th of November as a symbol of black resistance and unity. A much older myth, which casts Zumbi as neither divisive nor even necessarily symbolic of blackness, is expressed on the plaque of a monument dedicated to him in Brasília, which describes the former quilombola as "the leader of all races." If Zumbi, then, is on the one hand demonized as a "black Hitler," on the other hand he has also been improbably transformed into a benevolent leader of all Brazilians.

This particular myth has several smaller, seemingly opposing legends wrapped into it. Scholars have shown fugitive slave communities to have been home to diverse groups, in addition to people of African descent, also indigenous and white people. In one sense, then, Zumbi could be accurately described at least as a leader of a racially diverse group of people. But the monument in Brasília suggests something larger and more tightly aligned with the myth of racial democracy. However diverse Palmares and other mocambos and quilombos were, to hold them as representative symbols of a multi-racial colonial order would be absurd. It would be similarly incorrect to portray quilombos as simply oppositional to colonial society—in many cases, fugitive settlements traded and interacted regularly with nearby towns and farms. But that subtlety in no way suggests that Palmares or Zumbi may be understood as some kind of gel that bonded society happily together. Thanks in part to the suicide myth, over time some writers (on both the left and the right) helped create the most improbable of legends—the runaway slave, who rejected a peace alliance, was known for his fierceness, and who died a bloody death as a symbol of peaceful and democratic interracial harmony.

Any doubt about the veracity of the "leader of all races" label and companion myth of racial democracy was viscerally dismissed in 2018, when vandals effaced the Brasília Zumbi monument with red paint evoking a gunshot wound.



Monument to Zumbi in Brasília, extolling him
as the "Black Leader of All Races". Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zumbidospalmares.jpg



The monument vandalized in 2018
Available at:
http://www.palmares.gov.br/?p=50538

A lesson, a tragedy

While history and historians provide plenty of material with which to bury Neves' assault, the judge herself might benefit from some of the messages and displays from Carnival this year. Mangueira's much talked about winning samba enredo (Carnival theme song), "História pra ninar gente grande" (Lullaby History for Grownups) is a case in point. In delivering "the history that history doesn't tell" and stories "that the book erased," Mangueira took an almost direct stab at Neves, or at least what she represents.[9] The famous samba school exhorted revelers to hear the voices of, among others, countless "Marielles," an explicit reference to the slain leader who Neves slandered.

Mangueira also harkened the age of Palmares, though—importantly—not via Zumbi. "Brazil," Mangueira sang, "your name is Dandara."[10] The choice is instructive, not only for centering a black female figure at the center of history and the nation but also for its meaning about the power of myth and legend. While Neves slings "myth" as an insult, the truth is that history does not exist without it. Sometimes this results in fake history precisely along the lines of what Neves and her kin constantly try to prop up as unassailable truth. Other times it is the primary or only means by which the histories that history doesn't tell survive. It is possible that a palmarina named Dandara existed and also possible that she was assembled from the detritus of very real stories of black women cast aside by colonial violence and "official" history. In other words, and in this case, legend and myth play an undeniably important and meaningful role in making history more representative and more accurate.

In 2014, the journalist Dandara Tinoco wrote a moving column in *O Globo* about her namesake (Tinoco). The piece reflected on the seeming countless "uncertainties" surrounding Dandara's life and also on the immense power that her figure could nonetheless inspire. Three years later, Brazil and the international community viewed shocking video of the brutal killing of a transgender woman named Dandara dos Santos (Phillips). Together, the two Dandaras suggest the value and indeed necessity of understanding and honoring the importance of historical myth-making. Dandara Tinoco and Dandara dos Santos remind us that, in spite of the rhetoric coming from Neves and other likeminded pundits, slavery continues to swing a long tail, capable of inspiring memories and narratives about resistance, suffering and other dynamic aspects of humanity, and at the same time equally adept at unleashing brutal violence against those memories and against individuals who have dared to create and keep them alive.

---

* **Marc A. Hertzman** is Associate Professor of History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. He is the author of *Making Samba: A New History of Race and Music in Brazil*, which will be translated into Portuguese by Editora 7Letras this year. He is writing a history about the memory of Zumbi's death from 1695 to the present.

References

"5 Momentos em Que a Desembargadora Marília Castro Neves Criou Polêmica". *Bol Notícias*. 20 March 2018. https://noticias.bol.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/entretenimento/2018/03/20/5-momentos-em-que-a-desembargadora-marilia-neves-poderia-ter-ficado-quieta.htm. Accessed: 22 March 2019.

ALESSI, Gil. "Líder do Movimento Brasil Livre compara Zumbi a Hitler 'para chocar.'" *EL PAÍS*, 7 Apr. 2015, https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2015/04/07/politica/1428432891_689300.html. Accessed 22 March 2019.

BONILLA, Yarimar. "Trump's False Claims about Puerto Rico Are Insulting. But They Reveal a Deeper Truth." *Washington Post*, 14 September 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/09/14/trumps-false-claims-about-puerto-rico-are-insulting-they-reveal-deeper-truth/?utm_term=.3eb103696617. Accessed 19 March 2019.

CARNEIRO, Edison. *O Quilombo dos Palmares*. 2ª Edição. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1958.

"Dandara: a face feminina de Palmares." *Geledés*, 20 Oct. 2011, https://www.geledes.org.br/dandara-a-face-feminina-de-palmares/. Accessed 22 March 2019.

ENNES, Ernesto. *As guerras nos Palmares (subsídios para a sua história)*. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1938.

FREITAS, Décio. *República de Palmares*: pesquisa e comentários em documentos históricos do século XVII. Maceió: Edufal, 2004.

FRY, Peter, et al. (eds.). *Divisões perigosas: políticas raciais no Brasil contemporâneo*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2007.

GOMES, Flávio dos Santos. A hidra e os pântanos: mocambos, quilombos e comunidades de fugitivos no Brasil (séculos XVII-XIX). São Paulo: UNESP, 2005.

GOMES, Flávio dos Santos (ed.). *Mocambos de Palmares*: histórias e fontes (séculos XVI-XIX). Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2010.

KATZNELSON, Ira. *When Affirmative Action Was White*: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America. W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

LARA, Silvia Hunold. *Palmares & Cucaú*: o aprendizado da dominação. 2008. Tese (apresentada para o concurso de Professor Titular). Campinas, UNICAMP.

NARLOCH, Leandro. *Guia politicamente incorreto da história do Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Leya, 2012.

PHILLIPS, Dom. "Torture and Killing of Transgender Woman Stun Brazil." *The New York Times*, 8 Mar. 2017. *NYTimes.com*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/americas/brazil-transgender-killing-video.html. Accessed 30 December 2017.

REIS, João José, and GOMES, Flávio dos Santos, editors. *Liberdade por um fio*: história dos quilombos no Brasil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996.

TINOCO, Dandara. "Descrita como heroína, Dandara, mulher de Zumbi, tem biografia cercada de incertezas." *O Globo*, 15 November 2014, https://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/historia/descrita-como-heroina-dandara-mulher-de-zumbi-tem-biografia-cercada-de-incertezas-14567996. Accessed 30 December 2017.

WOOTSON JR. Cleve R. "Trump implied Frederick Douglass was alive. The abolitionist's family offered a 'history lesson.'" *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/02/02/trump-implied-frederick-douglass-was-alive-the-abolitionists-family-offered-a-history-lesson/?utm_term=.2a214a5230b1. Accessed 1 April 2019.

Notas

[1] https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/black-tuesday/ Accessed 18 March 2019.

[2] https://www.facebook.com/Euzinha.Marilinha. Accessed 6 February 2019. *Conhece a verdade e ela te libertará.*

[3] Both build on earlier waves, spearheaded by Ernesto Ennes, Edison Carneiro, and Décio Freitas (Carneiro, Ennes, Freitas).

[4] *tornou-se um contraponto, um líder que havia avaliado mal o jogo de forças, sucumbira ao peso da derrota e perdera prestígio entre os seus*

[5] *inventar mitos históricos como Zumbi para estimular um racismo que o Brasil até então não conhecia.*

[6] *Zumbi tinha escravos*.

[7] *Essa informação parece ofender algumas pessoas hoje em dia, a ponto de preferirem omiti-la o censurá-la*.

[8] *O sistema escravocrata só começou a ruir quando o Iluminismo ganhou força na Europa e nos Estados Unidos... Os abolicionistas apareceram um século depois de Zumbi e a 7 mil quilômetros da região onde o Quilombo dos Palmares foi construído. É difícil acreditar que, no meio das matas de Alagoas, Zumbi tenha se adiantado ao espírito humanista europeu ou previsto os ideais de liberdade, igualdade e fraternidade da Revolução Francesa*.

[9] https://www.letras.mus.br/sambas/mangueira-2019/ (*A história que a história não conta*) + (*versos que o livro apagou*).

[10] *Brasil, o teu nome é Dandara.*